

Representations of Women in Three Films Directed by Marilou Diaz-Abaya: *Brutal* (1980), *Moral* (1982), and *Karnal (Of the Flesh)*, 1983)

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### I. *Brutal* (1980)

*Brutal* (1980) was set in the late seventies to the early eighties. There were active feminist groups in the Philippines during this period despite the presence of the Martial Law and the limits it imposed on the political movements that people can / should support. Women in the '80s were more aware of their rights; they started to address national issues from a perspective of a woman (Gomez 57). Such is the case for the character of Clara. As a writer, she aimed to tell Monica's story to show how women are belittled in Philippine society.

The film is told through a series of flashbacks from Clara's interviews with people around Monica. There are flashbacks within flashbacks like the scene with Cynthia telling Clara about the time when she told Monica about her first sexual experience. The frame transitions to Cynthia and Monica inside the library and then dissolves into another flashback of Cynthia's story with Cynthia's voiceover. The music also sets the year when the film takes place. Music released by Michael Jackson and Irene Cara from 1979 to the early '80s play in the background of some scenes.

The camera in the film is more dynamic in the way it moves and captures the women, their bodies, movements, and reactions in the film. There were more handheld camera shots and movements that lean into or adjust to close-ups of the characters' body or facial reactions to a point that it sometimes show the camera's shadow. Sometimes the focus on the lens becomes a bit softer. The camera movements, follow throughs, and the angles make the visuals look more realistic. Some scenes look like they were homemade like the scene where Tato sexually abuses Monica in the hallway of their home in front of his friends. The same technique is used towards the end of the film when Tato and his friends are seen drinking, kissing, and sharing two women. Because some scenes look like they're homemade, it somehow adds a rawness to the them—like the viewer is actually present in the room or the camera is

another character that sees the men take advantage of Monica, Tato's friends feeling groggy from the sleeping pills in their beers, and the women dancing while Tato is playing the drums. The camera playing a more voyeuristic role is established in the first scene of the film where the handheld camera enters the hallway. The frame freezes and the sound of a camera shutter goes off—as if someone is taking a photo of Monica being escorted out of her own house.

The three lead characters in the film—Monica, Cynthia, and Clara—come from different backgrounds and ascribe to different ideals. Monica comes from a more conservative family. She obeys and does not question what her religious mother and strict father orders her to do. She's naive, obedient, traditional and idealistic. She values her virginity, considers sex sacred, and believes in the concept of a monogamous marriage. The film shows the demise of a virginal woman—how she stood by her principles and how physical, emotional, mental, and sexual abuse can affect a woman—as graphically shown in the rape scenes and emphasized by her body being the focus of the camera.

Both Cynthia and Clara are independent and not afraid to share their opinions. They point out the expectations of women and the double standards they notice around them. They're also not afraid to share their opinions about men. Clara talks about women in society when she says, “*Either maging birhen siya na inaalagaan ang mga lalaki o magiging puta siya na pwedeng bilingin ng mga lalaki.*” (“Either she becomes a virgin who takes care of men or a prostitute men can buy.”) Her wanting to write an article about Monica not only attempts to show how women can be abused in society; it also aims to help Monica in her trial. This actually helps establish the feminist theme of the film. By showing an array of women's experiences, their personalities, and opinions about inequality and oppression, ideas become expressed and politics are challenged through the film thereby using it as a tool that can demystify dominant systems of ideas.

Clara is living in with Jake. The gender roles are switched in their relationship since Jake does the household chores more than Clara. She admits liking their setup when she tells him that she doesn't want to stay at home full-time. She says, “*Ayaw ko, Jake. Ayaw kong sinusuportahan ako ng lalaki. Gusto ko na 'tong arrangement natin.*” (“I don't want to, Jake. I don't want a man to support me. I already like our

arrangement.”) However, it’s not enough for Jake; he thinks that Clara is only using him to show that she is a liberated woman—someone who is more open-minded and does not necessarily ascribe to traditional gender roles in society. I personally think that this reveals more about Jake’s character than it does about Clara’s. It reveals Jake’s prejudices or expectations out of a relationship. It reveals what can happen when the roles of men and women are reversed, how men can deal with it, and what they can say about their partners for being less traditional and/or more liberated.

Cynthia is unapologetically herself. She tries to live as free as she can be—independent and away from her own family. She is unfazed by what people say about her. She is not afraid to use her body for her pleasure and advantage—something that she doesn’t share right away, even to Carla during their first meeting, but it’s a side of her that she owns up to and does not deny. Unlike Monica, Cynthia doesn’t believe in the concept of marriage and monogamy. She says, “They don’t deserve it.”

## II. *Moral* (1982)

*Moral* (1982) tells the story in a straightforward manner through a color grading that’s a soft, pinkish hue. The camera does not distract and is often stationary. There are not a lot of movements or zoom ins. The scenes are cut from one frame to another to indicate a transition. This, however, does not help in clarifying the amount of time that passed between the scenes. What could tell the passing of time would be Marites’ pregnancy, their graduation, and Marites’ second pregnancy; while there are no flashbacks like in *Brutal* (1980), momentous events have to happen to help indicate the passage of time.

The personalities of the women reflect through their clothing choices. Marites wears comfortable feminine dresses in light colors. When she’s pregnant, she’s often in a white maternity dress with her hair tied in a ribbon. Sylvia is in more sophisticated clothing albeit getting in trouble for not wearing a bra while teaching in school. However, this also shows Sylvia’s autonomy over her own body and her desire for freedom to wear whatever she wants. Joey’s clothing style is simpler than the rest; she usually wears button-down shirts or oversized t-shirts with denim jeans—comfortable clothing and easy to bring with

her whenever she stays in the homes of her friends. Kathy, always enjoying the attention of people, has a more eye-catching and interesting style. She wears flashy and trendier clothes.

Marites is more traditional and reserved. She initially comes off as submissive to Dodo. However, her experiences in marriage (disagreements, differences in family decisions, marital rape) and motherhood (postnatal depression), helps her grow and learn to stand up for herself. Ultimately, she asserts her rights as a mother and as a wife. She tells Dodo what she wants to do in her career and what can be best for their family.

Sylvia is known as the honest and reliable one among the four women. As a mother, ex-wife, and a friend, she's able to help and take care of the people close to her. She spends time with Junior. Still in love with her ex-husband, she accepts Robert's sexuality and relationship with Celso. She's coincidentally the contact person when Joey was in the hospital. She also reunites Joey and Jerry. She listens to the marital problems of Marites and loans Kathy money at the start of her career.

Sylvia is level-headed and helps her friends with their life decisions: Marites on her marital problems; Joey's feelings for Jerry; Kathy's vision for her career. As a teacher and a lawyer, she argues well and speaks her mind; she expressed her opinions about a woman's right and freedom to wear whatever she wants to wear. She also chooses conversations to engage in; she didn't engage in further conversation with Dodo because Marites should have to come to him when she's ready.

Joey is a complex character. She has issues about her mother leaving her with her father at an early age. She smokes and does drugs. She is in love with a man who doesn't love her back. She doesn't have a permanent home. She doesn't have a job. She has gone home with many men and she can talk about it with anyone including Maggi and Jerry. Even if Jerry tells her that people in campus talk about her, she says, "*Pinipili ko naman ang mga lalaking sinasamahan ko ah... eh bakit kayong mga lalaki hindi pinag-chichismisan kapag marami kayong babaeng sinasamahan?*" ("*I choose the men I'm with... why won't people talk about men when they're with many girls?*")

Joey also believes in autonomy over her body. She's willing to have an abortion to turn her life around after going to the hospital and learning that she has a congenital disorder. She starts volunteering her time at an orphanage and eventually, she gets a place of her own.

Kathy is a career-driven woman. There are similarities between Kathy and the character of Cynthia from *Brutal* (1980) aside from being played by the same actress, Gina Alajar. Kathy and Cynthia are not afraid to go after what they want and use whatever available resources and connections they have. Kathy networks and goes even as far as faking relationships and sleeping with talent managers just to get ahead of her career. While the places that she performs in changes, the music that she sings becomes closer to her brand as an artist, and her name is starting to get more traction, she decides to gear her efforts towards her craft. She decides that she wants to be a better singer.

*Moral* (1982) and *Brutal* (1980) take place around almost the same time in the city. Ishmael Bernal describes the women of *Moral* as a group that have found their freedom. They strike out into the world, but realize that there's anguish and pain wherever they go.

### III. *Karnal* (*Of the Flesh*, 1983)

The camera in *Karnal* (*Of the Flesh*, 1983) is unobtrusive. It does not move much and often remains stationary at a medium shot. It tells the story in a direct manner and is straightforward; the movement of the camera is not distracting. It typically zooms in and out or pans left to right and vice versa. The camera was also never handheld. The transitions between the scenes alternate from a cut-to-cut to a dissolve. The lighting also appears natural. It is predominantly warm which matches the weather, background, and the ambiance of a rural area in the Philippines. The character of the Storyteller helps the narration of the passing of time.

There are not a lot of tight shots of the women in the film. There's always some distance between the characters and the camera. Closeups were only on hair, ankles, and hands. While Puring's breasts were shown in the film, the sequence didn't stay long. There's also no harsh lighting on Puring and Doray and the bed scenes with their husbands were minimally lit. Closeups on Puring's body were only focused

on her foot as she massages it. There's also another closeup on her lips, hair, and hands as Goryo's hand touches them, making the scene look and feel more intimate.

The non-lyrical music sets the melodramatic tone of the scenes. They transition from a slow and calming rhythm of a flute to something faster and more suspenseful to a quiet the ambient background sound. This adds to the melodramatic feel of the film.

Puring and Doray represent the reserved women of Iberian society that the Spanish try to model indigenous women after, but they are less afraid to go after what they want even if it results to fights with or bruises from the men in their lives.

The characters of Puring and Doray are very different. Doray is more afraid of her father, Gusting, than Puring. Doray does not answer back at Gusting and just simply follows his orders. Doray is also better at housework because she's had more practice on them. She wears simple, decorous clothing; as per Menardo's request, she wears *baro't saya* in and out of the house even when working on domestic tasks. The *baro't saya* is the national dress of the Philippines. It's made out of light materials Puring wears a white, sleeveless dress when indoors. She wears closed shoes with heels and doesn't always wear *baro't saya* outdoors—she once wore a salmon-colored dress that grabbed the attention of the neighbors because it's different from the *baro't saya* that women typically wore in their town.

The introduction of Christianity in the Philippines and the Church's effort to police the body instilled discipline in wearing specific articles of clothing and control over a woman's sexuality (Camagay 121). The female body is seen as a source of evil and temptation so women were constrained to wear *tapis* (a rectangular cloth) over the *saya* (long skirt). The *camiso* (blouse) came with sleeves made out of light fabric suited for the tropical climate. Undergarments are used to cover the breast so the top wouldn't be too revealing. The body was not be exposed and glorified, but instead covered and hidden (Camagay 124).

Puring and Doray as daughters and wives were informed by misogynistic roles and expectations assigned to women in the Philippines starting from the Spanish regime. These roles were determined by theologians in the Iberian Peninsula from the sixteenth century and were passed onto women in the

Philippines. This idea of a woman stuck around but because of the presence of the Americans and their education system, women became more aware of their agency.

Daughters were viewed as second to sons. They were tied to housework and were obedient. They were seen as self-sacrificing. By not going to school, Doray not only sacrifices for her family; she also follows Gusting. She disregards her happiness despite kneeling and begging her father to allow her to leave Menardo so she can be with Jose.

As wives, Puring and Doray respected their husbands' requests and wishes. They followed their orders—Doray dresses appropriately as preferred by Menardo; Puring stays inside the house despite wanting to work in the town capital with Narcing. While Puring is expected to stay indoors, Narcing works all day and waits for Puring to get pregnant so they can start a family. Women in rural places have a higher peak in fertility than women in Manila. To keep Doray and Puring busy, they work on domestic tasks.

Some of the roles and expectations of wives and daughters still hold up to present-day Philippine society. Double-income households are more accepted now. While it's currently more common for women to work so they can help their husbands, it is still expected of women to tend to the needs of the children more than the husbands. Aside from their employment, women at home should be housekeepers and family treasurers as well (Sevilla 42).

While coming from different backgrounds, Puring and Doray experience similar circumstances. They were both controlled by the men in their lives and were afraid of them. They tried to fight for their freedom—Doray begging her father to leave Menardo, go to the town's capital, and be with Jose; and Puring who argues with Narcing to convince him to go back to Manila with her. However, the two women remain trapped inside the home which is similar to the experience of the storyteller who turns out to be Doray's daughter with Jose. The women remain pushed around by the men in their lives, are trapped inside their homes, and are offered limited choices.

The film also deals with themes like incest, domestic violence, and marital affairs—themes that highlight issues that women in the Philippines face. However, in *Karnal* (1983), there's an added layer to

a woman's experience. The storyteller wraps up the narrative by talking about mother, Doray. She says, "*Dito siya sa San Juan nakatira pero ang kaluluwa niya ay doon pa rin nakahimlay sa mga wasak na kaluluwa ng Mulawin.*" ("She lives in San Juan now but her soul lays with the broken souls of Mulawin.")

Puring, Doray, and Doray's daughter are cursed women. The only way to deal with it is to lose the men in their lives, leave and never come back, do not marry a man, or become mourners who cry over the people they lost in their journey.